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ABSTRACT

Empathy among 61 elementary school students in the 4th grade was investigated, with particular attention to the relationship between empathy and the variables of self-concept, social competence, popularity, number of reciprocal friends, friendliness, and four dimensions of friendship expectations--mutual activities, conventional morality, loyalty and commitment, and empathic understanding. Several paper and pencil measures were administered to the children, demographic data were obtained, and classroom teachers completed rating scales of children's social competence. Empathy was assessed using the Feshbach and Roe Test for Empathy. Subjects were divided into high and low empathy groups based on their empathy raw score. Findings indicated that empathy was positively correlated with the number of reciprocal friends, friendliness, conventional morality expectancy, and expectation of loyalty and commitment. Highly empathic children had more reciprocal friendships and expected more conventional morality from their friends than did minimally empathic peers. Level of empathy could be predicted from the number of reciprocal friends and the conventional morality friendship expectancy subscore. No significant gender differences were found. Results suggest that highly empathic children may be better able to maintain close relationships than children low in empathy. Empathy was not related to teacher ratings of social competence. (RH)

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Empathy and Social Relationships in Children

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Running head: Empathy and Social Relationships

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Abstract

The relationship between empathy and the following variables was investigated for a group of fourth graders: self-concept, social competence, popularity, number of reciprocal friends, friendliness, and 4 dimensions of friendship expectations (mutual activities), conventional morality, loyalty and commitment, empathic understanding). Empathy was positively correlated with the number of reciprocal friends, friendliness, conventional morality expectancy, and the loyalty and commitment expectancy. High empathy children had more reciprocal friendships and expected more conventional morality from their friends than low empathy children. Empathy level could be predicted from the number of reciprocal friends and the conventional morality friendship expectancy subscore. No significant gender differences were found. Results suggest that high empathy children may be better able to maintain close relationships than low empathy children.

Empathy and Social Relationships in Children

Empathy is thought to be an important factor in the development and expression of prosocial behavior in children. While some writers define empathy as the cognitive ability to recognize the thoughts, feelings or intentions of another person (Borke, 1971; Chandler & Greenspan, 1972), others believe that empathy requires, in addition, the vicarious experiencing of the emotional state of another person (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1978; Feshbach & Roe, 1968). Currently the view of empathy as both a cognitive and affective response predominates in the empathy literature.

There have been inconsistent findings with regard to gender differences in empathy. Some researchers have reported higher empathy scores for girls than boys (Ahammer & Murray, 1979; Borke, 1973; Hoffman & Levine, 1976; Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978). In contrast, some recent reviews have concluded that there are no significant gender differences in empathy, affective role taking and prosocial behavior (Berman, 1980; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Underwood & Moore, 1982). When females were found to score higher than males it was in studies in which the experimenter was a female. Subjects scored higher on picture/story empathy measures when interviewed by a same-sex experimenter.

Empathy is also inconsistently related to personality characteristics and social behaviors. Friedrich and Stein (1973) found verbal and physical aggression to be correlated with nurturing of other children (as a measure of empathy) in a sample of two- to four-year-old boys. However, Feshbach and Feshbach (1969) found that empathy and aggression were negatively correlated. Further, empathy has also been inconsistently related to such variables as cognitive competence, aggression, self-concept, and teacher ratings of prosocial behavior (Feshbach, 1982). Little is known, as well, about the relationship of empathy to children's friendships and expectations for friendships.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationships between empathy and the following variables: social skills, self-concept, friendship expectancy, popularity, number of mutual friendships, (social and personality variables); and demographic and family variables, such as race, sex, birth order, and number of siblings. It was first hypothesized that teacher ratings of social skills, the number of mutual friendships, and the score on the Empathic Understanding subscale of the Friendship Expectancy measure will be the variables most highly correlated with empathy. A second hypothesis was that self-concept and popularity would be correlated with empathy, although these correlations were expected to be lower than the first group of variables. No hypothesis regarding gender differences in empathy scores were made.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were members of two fourth grade classes at a public elementary school in the Southeast. There were 38 girls and 23 boys in the sample. Fifty-seven percent were white and 43% were black students.

Materials

Several paper and pencil measures were administered to the children. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale entitled "The Way I Feel About Myself" (Piers, 1969) was used as a measure of each child's self-concept (PSCS). The PSCS is a self report measure consisting of 80 items written as declarative statements reflecting children's opinion of themselves. Half of the items are positive (e.g., I am a happy person) and half are negative (e.g., I behave badly at home). The following six areas of self-evaluation are covered: behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance, anxiety, popularity, and happiness.

Friendship expectations were assessed by a modified version of the Children's Friendship Expectancy Inventory (LaGaipa & Wood, 1973). The inventory consists of twenty-eight behaviors or qualities that could exist in friendships; seven statements are included from each of the following four expectancy areas: conventional morality (e.g, Do not lie or cheat), mutual activities (e.g., Go places together), empathic understanding (e.g., Can talk about my personal problems), and loyalty and

commitment (e.g., Are loyal to me). Subjects decide how important each behavior or quality is to them in choosing friends. The original scale was modified by changing the ranking response mode to a Likert scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important). A separate score was calculated for each of the four expectancy areas with high scores indicating that the area is important to the subject in choosing friends.

Popularity, friendliness, and the number of mutual friendships were determined by choices made on the sociometric questionnaire. Children placed a 1, 2, and 3 by the names of their three best friends and circled the names of their other friends from a class roster. Friendliness was determined by the total number of friends a child circled. Popularity was determined by the number of other children who select a given child as a best friend or friend. Number of mutual friendships refers to reciprocal or dyadic friendships in which two children select each other as a friend.

Demographic information was obtained from a background information sheet. The children were asked to provide information on their sex, race, number of siblings, and ages of siblings (to obtain birth order information).

Empathy was assessed by the Feshbach and Roe Affective Situations Test for Empathy (Feshbach, 1968). The test consists of four sequences of slides of children accompanied by stories

under different affective categories. After each sequence (Happy, Sad, Angry, or Fearful) the child is asked, "How do you feel?" Responses were scored as follows: 0 points were given for an inappropriate response (i.e., answering, "Happy" after the Sad sequence); 1 point was given for a response of a correct directional tendency, negative or positive (i.e., answering "Bad" following the Angry sequence); 2 points were given for an exact match with the sequence label.

Finally, to assess social skills, the classroom teachers filled out the teacher rating scale from the social skills section of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 19). The teachers rated each child on 7 items (e.g., This child is popular with other kids; like this child). Each item is rated on a 4-point scale; a score of 1 reflects low perceived competence and a score of 4 reflects high perceived competence.

Procedure

The Feshbach and Roe Test for Empathy was administered to the children in small groups of 3 or 4 children (selected at random from each classroom) in a small room separate from the classroom. The order in which the slides and stories were presented was counterbalanced by randomly assigning one of each of the 24 possible order combinations to one group or boys and one group of girls. Between each different affective sequence, a distractor task involving playing cards was given in order to reduce the

residual carryover from one emotion to another. After each sequence, the child asked to state how he felt by writing a short answer on a sheet of paper. This answer was used as the primary index of empathy.

All other measures were given in a group testing session for each class which lasted about 45 minutes. The modified Children's Friendship Expectancy was read aloud to the children to insure that they understood each of the statements and responded to them in terms of what they felt was important in choosing a friend. The Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale, and the Demographic and Popularity Sheet were given to the children with cover sheets and instructions to work independently and not to look at another child's answers. It was hoped that this would reduce both contamination, and the risk of hurt feelings, as the popularity, friendliness, and number of mutual friendships measures involve the selection of specific children from a class roster.

Results

A series of Pearson correlations were calculated to determine the relationship between empathy and the following variables: teacher ratings, number of siblings, birth order, number of reciprocal friends, popularity, friendliness, self-concept, and the mutual activities, conventional morality, loyalty, and empathic understanding subscales of the Friendship Expectancy Scale. Significant positive correlations ($p < .05$) were found

between empathy and: number of reciprocal friends (r = .50), friendliness (r = .30), and the conventional morality (r = .33) and loyalty and commitment (r = .28) subscales of the Friendship Expectancy Scale (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

A mean split was used to divide subjects into high and low empathy groups based on their empathy raw score. There were 35 high empathy and 26 low empathy children. A 2 (gender: male, female) x 2 (empathy: high, low) MANOVA was performed with popularity, number of reciprocal friends, self-concept, friendliness, teacher's rating of social competence, and the conventional morality and loyalty subscales of the Friendship Expectancy Scale. There was a significant multivariate main effect for empathy, $F(7, 51) = 2.30$, $p < .04$). The number of reciprocal friends ($F = 10.23$, $p < .01$) and conventional morality ($F = 4.23$, $p < .05$) were significant univariate main effects (see Table 2). High empathy children had more reciprocal friendships, and expected more conventional morality from their friends than the low empathy children. No significant gender differences were found.

Insert Table 2 about here

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed with empathy as the criterion and the following variables as predictors: gender, age, number of siblings, birth order, friendliness, popularity, number of reciprocal friends, self-concept, teacher ratings of social competence and the 4 friendship expectancy subscales (mutual activities, conventional morality, loyalty and commitment, and empathic understanding). The multiple predictors of empathy were the number of reciprocal friends and the conventional morality friendship expectancy subscore, $\underline{R} = .56$, $\underline{R}^2 = .32$ (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The results of this study partially support the first hypothesis; the number of reciprocal friendships was positively correlated with empathy. Children with the highest empathy scores had more reciprocal friendships than those children with the lowest empathy scores. Although there are no data with which to directly compare the present finding this result provides some support for studies which have linked empathy with prosocial behaviors. For example, Feshbach (1982) found that empathy was positively related to peer ratings of prosocial behavior and negatively related to peer ratings of aggressive and antisocial

behavior. High empathy children may be viewed more positively by peers and thus are able to maintain more reciprocal relationships than their low empathy counterparts.

Feshbach (1982) also found a relationship between empathy and the recognition of changes in the feelings of others. High empathy children were more aware of the feelings of others than low empathy children. Such an awareness of people's feelings may be an important component of empathy and an essential element of developing and maintaining reciprocal friendships. It may not be possible to maintain a close relationship with a peer without the ability to show some empathy toward this person. It is important to note that popularity (i.e, the number of times chosen as a friend by peers) and friendliness (i.e., the number of peers selected as friends) were not correlated with empathy. High empathy children were not more popular or friendly than low empathy children. However, high empathy children were more likely to have friendships that involved mutual liking than the low empathy children.

Empathy was related to the conventional morality friendship expectancy but not the empathic understanding subscale. High empathy children placed more importance on their friends being nice and kind than low empathy children. Nevertheless, both the high and low empathy children valued conventional morality in their friends which would place them at Bigelow and La Gaipa's

normative expectation stage of friendship expectations (Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975). This stage is dominated by the conventional morality expectancy and is generally reached around the fourth grade. High and low empathy children expected similar levels of empathy from their friends. This finding suggests that low empathy children are expecting behaviors from their peers that they are not capable of reciprocating. This may have contributed to the finding that low empathy children have fewer reciprocal friends than the high empathy children.

Contrary to the second hypothesis, empathy was not related to the teacher ratings of social competence. The lack of significance in this case may be a result of the inability of the teacher rating scale to assess social competence. A reexamination of the items on this scale revealed that many items were actually assessing popularity and not social competence (e.g., This kid has alot of friends; this kid is popular with other kids). This observation is somewhat supported by the finding that the teacher's rating of social competence was significantly correlated with the student's popularity rating by peers (r = .38, p < .05). If the social competence measure had actually assessed the type of skills needed in social situations (e.g., being a good listener, knowing how to resolve conflict, accepting differences in opinion) there may have been a relationship between empathy and social competence.

This study has attempted to explore the role of empathy in peer and friendship relations. The findings suggest that children who are more empathetic may have more successful peer interactions, are able to develop and maintain close relationships and thus may have better social adjustment than less empathetic children. Further research is needed to validate these patterns.

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Table 1

Empathy Correlated with the Friendship Variables, Self-Concept and the Teacher's Ratings of Social Competence

Variables	r
Friendship Expectations	
Mutual Activity	.19
Conventional Morality	.32*
Loyalty/Commitment	.27*
Empathic Understanding	.12
Self-Concept	.08
Social Competence	
(Teacher rating)	.11
Friendliness	.31*
# of Reciprocal Friends	.53**
Popularity	.15
n	61

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 2

Means for High and Low Empathy Groups

	Empathy Level	
Variables	High	Low
Friendship Expectations		
Conventional Morality	32.28	30.27*
Loyalty/Commitment	26.96	24.62
Self-Concept	58.89	54.27
Social Competence		
(Teacher rating)	20.18	19.69
Friendliness	10.66	8.25
# of Reciprocal Friends	6.35	3.90**
Popularity	45.78	40.26
n	35	26

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 3

Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Empathy

Variable Name	Beta	t	R	R^2	R^2 Change
# of Reciprocal Friends	.501	4.45**	.50	.25	.25
Conventional Morality Expectancy	.255	2.32*	.56	.32	.06

*p < .05, **p < .01